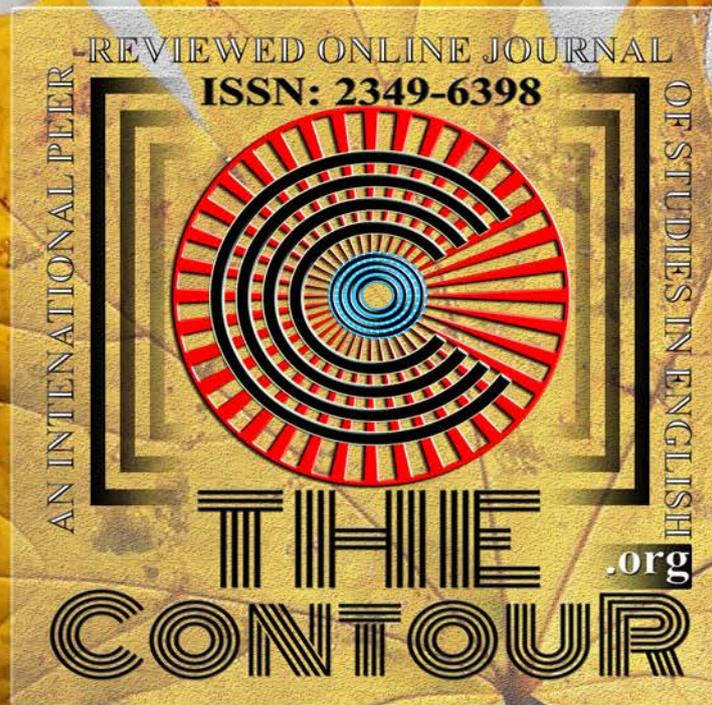


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# The Christ Pattern in Oscar Wilde: An Approach through Some of his Works

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## Abstract

*It was G. Wilson Knight who in his amazingly perceptive essay entitled “Christ and Wilde” drew our notice for the first time to the identical pattern in the lives of an Incarnation and a literary genius infamous for his life of the senses. Wilde, whatever may be the nature of his libido, was an extremely generous person, as most of his biographers admit and it was strange that a civilized society treated him in such a callous way towards the end of the nineteenth century. Wilde had always had a quest for a high order in society. Even if we leave aside the Fairy Tales, his other works, like Salome, De Profundis, The Soul of Man Under Socialism, The Picture of Dorian Gray and virtually almost all his works, are replete with the memories of Christ or latent Christian virtues. The purpose of this article is to enlarge the observations of Knight, and Wilde’s biographer Hesketh Pearson and highlight on the Christ pattern with reference to some texts of Wilde.*

**Keywords:** Victorian England, God, Christianity, faith, spirituality, conflicts, contemporary issues.

## Introduction

Christ pattern means taking Christ as the pattern of living by lowering our position, grade and standard. The principle of this type of living is to live in a humble and simple way, whatever high his position would be. Simple dress, simple food and simple living—are the motto of this pattern. The person thinks that in this way he might achieve God or reach closer to Him like Christ. He may have all the shortcomings and loopholes of a human but it would have been his birth right for him to take the standing of God. Love for children, neighbor and the whole human race, kindness, sympathy, sacrifice, honesty, simplicity etc. are the main exponents of this pattern.

Oscar Wilde had been living this type of life both in his works and in his personal life. Though there are some crucial flaws in his personal life, he took relief in the world of his own creation—his poetry, prose and drama. The linking of Christ and Wilde may seem queer to some orthodox minds with a strong religious bias, but G Wilson Knight focuses on the pattern of the two lives. Apart from the generosity of Wilde, there is an infinite capacity for endurance in Wilde, a genuine love for children, flowers, a refusal to save him, a lack of malice, humility amidst egotism, a kindness which comes out of the inmost provinces of his heart. As Knight rightly says in his essay: “Within was a strong idealism and a rich mine of human sympathy.”Wilde wrote of Christ and Christ like characters in a number of works and presents Christ in many ways. Actually



Wilde's religious attitudes share common features with his aesthetic morality. And his religious views thus are an evidence of his moral side of his thought and art. Quintus concludes, "They aim, like the higher ethics of his aestheticism, toward sympathy and love and attempt to make this world a better place, even if they do not account for the next." Here, in this article, we shall try to examine the moral vision as presented in the three short stories: "The Happy Prince", "The Selfish Giant" and "The Nightingale and the Rose" and his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* of Wilde and with references of Hesketh Pearson's observation in *The Life of Oscar Wilde* and Wilson Knight's essay "Christ and Wilde".

### **"The Happy Prince"**

There was a statue of a prince on a high place at the centre of the town. The prince wore jewels—thin leaves of fine gold all over his body, eyes made of two bright sapphires and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt. The prince was very happy when alive. Now he felt sorry for the poor as he had reviewed all the miseries of the poor from such a high place on the column. Out of kindness and purity of heart the prince has its jewels delivered to the poor via the swallow (now, on top of the hill, the prince can see the poverty that had previously been shielded from him). Gradually, one by one, the statue loses all its material wealth. But the more he loses his material wealth, the more he becomes wise. Actually he is richer inside for helping the needy, but no longer outside. But the pathetic thing is that when the swallow dies, his leaden heart is broken. The people remove the prince statue and discuss the next statue that will replace him. Material wealth is most important to them. They are hollow in their heart. The ending of the story is very interesting:

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

'You have rightly chosen,' said God, 'for in my gar of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.'

The story is allegorical to the social class system of Victorian England—the wealth of the upper classes versus the hunger, need of the poor. The moral lesson is directly related with the Christ pattern of the writer of "The Happy Prince". What Oscar Wilde portrays is that the worst aspects of modern society can be overcome by love and charity, which have the unique ability to unite men and make them a whole, the embodiment of God. Wilde wrote the fairy tale during the Victorian era, when the East End of London was awash with the suffering and forced labor of children, many of whom were forced into prostitution and almost all of whom lived in abject poverty. This social context is generally accepted as the inspiration for the story.

### **"The Selfish Giant"**

The main idea of "The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde is encompassed by the phrase spoken by the Giant in the story—"I have many beautiful flowers," he said; "but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all." There was a giant with his great castle. Once he left his castle to meet his friend. When he returned he saw his garden full of children. They were playing in his garden. He became excited and shouted at the children that he would allow nobody in his garden except himself. Nature punished him for his selfishness. There was winter in his garden though the spring had come



throughout all over the country. He felt sorry. One day, in the morning, he hurried toward the garden as he heard a linnets song. He was amazed to find the group of children in his garden instead of the bird. But result was the same. Spring had come at last. It was all because of the tiny child. He allowed everybody in his garden now and played with the children himself. He felt the bliss of real happiness. He identified the tiny child to be Christ Himself at the time of his death.

This story is one of the many allegorical tales in which Wilde infuses parables in order to imitate the way that Jesus would have combined a message with a story. The message is clear—don't be selfish. Selfishness cannot give happiness. The real happiness lies in living with and for others. The more you become kind, the more you become happy. And this happiness is perhaps eternal. Christ in the guise of a child utters, "You let me play once in your garden, today you shall come with me to my own garden, which is Paradise." The giant may be died but his deeds will be remembered forever that would inspire others to do the same kind of good deeds.

### **"The Nightingale and the Rose"**

*"The Nightingale and the Rose"* is a wonderful story of broken love. The story poignantly shows how love can be thrown aside, in the tale of the nightingale who sacrifices her blood to turn a white rose to a red one for a love sick student. A young man, the student, has feelings for a girl who promises to dance with him at a ball, if he would bring her a red rose. The boy is upset because he doesn't have any red roses, and a nightingale overhears this. The nightingale desperately tries to find a red rose and flies here and there searching for the same but she cannot. With no other option left, she sacrifices her life, using her blood to stain a white rose red. But the tree cried to the nightingale to press closer against the thorn: "Press closer, little nightingale." So the nightingale pressed closer and closer against the thorn and thus the thorn touched her heart. She feels an extreme death pain. It reminds us of the pain which Christ felt at the time of crucifixion. The more the pain was, the marvelous the rose became. In fact the suffering of the nightingale helps to changing the colour of the rose from white to red. Red is the symbol of life. Very interestingly one life is to be put in bargain for another life. But the girl whom the boy loves changes her mind despite his offer of a red rose, as she has a better gift from another suitor. Here lies the irony. Wilde criticizes the Victorian England here and feels pity for those who gradually become victim of the upper class by sacrificing their life in the name of false religion, love of nation and nationalism. The boy of the goes home and delves into a book. This is also a criticism against the callousness of the society. The society is so cruel that it does not pay any heed of the goodness and sacrifice of the others. What Wilde wants to convey here is that good people will be there always in our society whatever the situation may be as it is their good deeds on which the pillars of the so called society are made.

### ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins on a summer day in Victorian England. Lord Henry Wotton is seen observing the sensitive artist Basil Hallward's painting—the portrait of Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray is a handsome man and bosom friend of Basil. He believes that Dorian's beauty is responsible for the new mood in his art as a painter. Dorian meets Henry Wotton through Basil. He is soon instigated by the aristocrat's hedonistic world view—that beauty and sensual fulfillment



are the only things worth pursuing in life. Thinking his beauty will fade, Dorian expresses the desire to sell his soul to ensure that the picture, rather than he, will age and fade with time. His wish is granted he pursues a libertine life of varied and amoral experiences. He will stay young and beautiful while his portrait ages and records his every sin.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the hero tries to eliminate the moral boundaries by fulfilling the mere merry making and physical happiness and the result is none other than worse. The picture bears the sign of sin committed by the hero and nothing is happened to the outward bodily glow of the hero. Cohen sees here that Wilde is searching here both the self-expression and the moral-system. But there is a certain leap from his earlier tragedies, short stories and serious comedies to his later works. Wilde is slowly moving away from the Old Testament morality to the New Testament morality. Cohen stresses on that neglected part of the artist. However he tends to over-emphasize this side of Wilde and in this way he forgets to mention the witty and paradoxical aestheticism of Wilde. Cohen says that the early poems of Wilde have no self-revelatory value.

### **Observation of Hesketh Pearson**

My next citation would be a biography and it is none other than Hesketh Pearson's *The Life of Oscar Wilde*. It has an easily structured layout and a highly detailed reconstruction of the great writer's life; this is recommended to any fan of Oscar Wilde who doesn't know all that there is but wishes to learn it from a totally different point of view. It can at times be slightly prejudiced and the reader must remember the time in which it was written. However this does not detract from the book and should be enjoyed by any fan, giving in its outdated view an insight into the changes undergone in the last 100 years to the appreciation of his life and work. While arguing the morality of Wilde, Pearson states that "the artist must live the complete life, must accept it as it comes and stands like an angel before him, with its drawn and two-edged sword." Wilde's genius goes through his life and his works and through the spoken or written parables. He was a born teacher. So when his last days are called bare and unfruitful, Pearson comments, "Yet no one has ever called Christ or Socrates unproductive because each of these spoke his thoughts instead of writing them down" and each of them was punished by the then people like Wilde.

### **What Wilson Knight Says...?**

In Wilson Knight's essay "Christ and Wild" we can find a different aspect of Wilde which the previous critics are hardly touched. Citing many works and different examples Knight stresses on the point of Christian morality in Wilde. Though sometimes rude and in the hands of voluptuousness, Wilde has the basic norms of morality which come from the pains he got on the everyday way of life till death. "Within was a strong idealism", Wilson rightly says about Wilde, "and a rich mine of human sympathy." Like Shakespeare's Macbeth Wilde has also the soul of "mine eternal jewel". Wilson continues, "Wilde as aesthete knew both the fascination and the danger of the transcendent housed in the material. Through young male beauty he an eternal, jewel-like, perfection. But his experience of it, as of rich stones too, was ambivalent, balanced between eye lust and transcendence. Almost lust was transcendence; or rather the lust aroused was *a lust for the transcendent*. Wilde has variations and these variations play the major role in portrayal of the situations, mood and the basic norms of characterization. In *The Fisherman and*



*his Soul* the hero gives up his soul for love of a mermaid it leads him to crime with lures of gold and luxury. The story of *The Star-Child* is an interesting one. Here “a star-born child becomes a boy of beauty and Narcissistic pride, scorning poverty and ugliness and engaging in deliberate cruelty. Punished by the loss of his suffering he takes pity on a diseased beggar; so winning back his beauty and being finally crowned as a king.” Thus citing many works of Wilde Wilson tries to convey that there is a Christ like affinities in Wilde’s quest for higher order. From his youth Wilde was attracted by the Biblical parables and the New Testament and actually by the Christian religion. The works are the mere reflection of those ideas by which he has been attracted. He asserts the relation between the spiritual nature and the works of art. Wilson says, “Resemblances of Christ are clear in Wilde’s Byronic love of children, his egotism blended with humility, his repartee, his utter lack of malice, his forgiveness and Timonlike generosity (e.g. Pearson, XVIII.335); his magnanimity, his refusal to save himself, and patient endurance of shame.”

### **Conclusion:**

“Somehow or other I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious.”—Oscar Wilde

In the Preface of *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, Philip Kent Cohen utters:

“Morality, Wilde’s constant preoccupation, orders and gives meaning to his internal world. Sin and salvation are his recurrent themes. Throughout his writings runs a conflict between Old and New Testament moral perspectives—between vengeful judgment that damns the transgressor eternally, and the Christian law of love, with its offer of forgiveness.”

In fact Wilde posits a divided self and oscillates between the amoral hedonistic individuality and the socially matured Christian. Wilde would not bear such a world where evil is the master and the virtue is being extinguished day by day.

What John Allen Quintus portray in “Christ, Christianity and Oscar Wilde” is nothing but the assertion which we find in the essay by Wilson but here we find the treatment is very pointed towards the basic interest which Wilde bore from his childhood. Quintus declares, “...instead of rejecting Christianity, Wilde modified it to suit his own needs and, consequently, brought to Christianity the same kind of aesthetic impulse he brought to the spheres of politics and ethics.” Therefore, Wilde’s interpretation of Christianity is both subjective and heterodox. This is, I, think an important point made by Quintus because it adds a new angle to interpret Wilde’s works. He asserts, “Wilde’s religious doubts and fluctuations are predictable, however, mainly because he was a religious man, whatever else one may think of him.” Thus what we have found in Wilde’s works, especially in the three short stories “The Happy Prince”, “The Selfish Giant” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” and his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is a new dimension of his morality as he sees Christ and Christianity as an agency which can transform human beings into conscious being who demonstrate sympathy as well as self-reliance. And those sympathy and self-reliance can render people conscious enough of art and culture and aware of the importance of their soul. And after all they will become good people and our society a utopia.



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